

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF NORTH CAROLINA
STATESVILLE DIVISION
CRIMINAL ACTION NO. 5:11-CR-00073-KDB-DSC-22**

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

v.

JOHN ARLAND ROBERTS,

Defendant.

ORDER

THIS MATTER is before the Court on Defendant John Arland Roberts' *pro se* motion for compassionate release and reduction in sentence and home confinement under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A), the First Step Act of 2018, and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020. (Doc. No. 1028). Having carefully reviewed the Defendant's motion, exhibits, and all other relevant portions of the record, the Court will deny the motion without prejudice to a renewed motion properly supported by evidence and after exhaustion of his administrative remedies.

I. BACKGROUND

In 2013, Defendant pled guilty to one count of conspiracy to distribute, possess with intent to distribute and manufacture methamphetamine. (Doc. No. 350). He was sentenced to 135 months to run consecutively to his imprisonment under any previous state or federal sentence plus five years of supervised release and restitution of \$22,681.20. (Doc. No. 745).

Defendant is a 57-year-old male confined at FCI Butner Medium II, a medium-security federal corrections institution in North Carolina, with a projected release date of December 31, 2021. Defendant seeks a reduction in his sentence under the compassionate release statute, 18 U.S.C. §

3582(c)(1)(A). He claims he suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (C.O.P.D.) with emphysema, acute chronic bronchitis and acute chronic asthma. According to his Presentence Report, he contracted MRSA in jail in 2013, was diagnosed with asthma as a child, was diagnosed with C.O.P.D. and emphysema around age 38. (Doc. No. 445, ¶¶ 117-120). Defendant does not attach any medical records to his motion.

II. COMPASSIONATE RELEASE

A prisoner may bring a motion for compassionate release before the court only if he “has fully exhausted all administrative rights to appeal a failure” of the BOP to bring a motion on his behalf or if 30 days have passed since the warden received his request, “whichever is earlier.” 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A). Courts are split over whether the exhaustion requirement is jurisdictional or is a “case processing” rule that can be waived. *Compare United States v. Brown*, No. CR 12-20066-37-KHV, 2020 WL 1935053, at *1 (D. Kan. Apr. 22, 2020) (“The requirement to exhaust administrative remedies or wait 30 days after the warden receives a request is jurisdictional.”) *with United States v. Alam*, -- F.3d --, No. 20-1298, 2020 WL 2845694, at *2 (6th Cir. June 2, 2020) (holding that the administrative exhaustion requirement in 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A) is non-jurisdictional). The majority view is that the exhaustion requirement is a case processing rule. *See, e.g., United States v. Smith*, No. 12 Cr. 133 (JFK), 2020 WL 1849748, at *2-3 (S.D.N.Y. Apr. 13, 2020) (collecting cases).

If the rule is not jurisdictional, then it can be waived, forfeited, or abandoned, and is otherwise subject to exceptions. *See United States v. Zukerman*, 16 Cr. 194 (AT), 2020 WL 1659880, at *3 (S.D.N.Y. Apr. 3, 2020); *United States v. Russo*, No. 16-cr-441 (LJL), 2020 WL 1862294, at *5 (S.D.N.Y. Apr. 14, 2020). These exceptions include “where it would be futile, either because the agency decisionmakers are biased or because the agency has already determined the issue, . . .

where the administrative process would be incapable of granting adequate relief, . . . [or] where pursuing agency review would subject plaintiffs to undue prejudice.” *Zukerman*, 2020 WL 1659880, at *3 (citing *Washington v. Barr*, 925 F.3d 109, 118-19 (2d Cir. 2019)). It is Defendant’s burden to show that he has exhausted his remedies or that exhaustion would be futile or result in undue prejudice. *See, e.g., United States v. Bolino*, No. 06-cr-0806(BMC), 2020 WL 32461, at *1 (E.D.N.Y. Jan. 2, 2020) (requiring defendant to prove that the exhaustion requirement has been met). While Defendant claims futility of the appeal process and that the appeal process has four levels which could take at least 110 days, the Defendant did not appeal but instead waited three and one-half months to file this motion with the Court.

Here, Defendant has not exhausted his remedies as required under 18 U.S.C. § 3852(c)(1)(A). While he attaches a denial of his request for compassionate release from the warden, he has not exhausted all administrative appeals of the warden’s adverse decision that are available to him.

According to the BOP’s website, FCI Butner Medium II currently has zero inmates and 1 staff with confirmed active cases of COVID-19. There are approximately 1,400 inmates at FCI Butner Medium II. There have been no inmate deaths while 3 inmates have recovered and 1 staff has recovered. Given this information, the Court finds that Defendant has not met his burden of showing that the exhaustion requirement in 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A) should be excused. With no current case amongst the inmate population at FCI Butner Medium II, requiring Defendant to exhaust his administrative remedies within the BOP before petitioning this Court would not result in any “catastrophic health consequences” or unduly prejudice Defendant. *See United States v. Fraction*, No. 3:14-CR-305, 2020 WL 3432670, at *7 (M.D. Pa. June 23, 2020) (finding the defendant did “not demonstrate any ‘catastrophic health consequences’ to make exhaustion futile or show that he could be unduly prejudiced if he had to wait to exhaust his administrative remedies

with the BOP”). Generalized concerns regarding the possible spread of COVID-19 to the inmate population at FCI Butner Medium II are not enough for this Court to excuse the exhaustion requirement, especially considering the BOP’s statutory role, and its extensive and professional efforts to curtail the virus’s spread at FCI Butner Medium II. *See United States v. Raia*, 954 F.3d 594, 597 (3d Cir. 2020).

The Court does not intend to diminish Defendant’s concerns about the pandemic, especially given his health conditions. However, given the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic and the complexity of the situation in federal institutions, it is even more important that Defendant first attempt to use the BOP’s administrative remedies. *See United States v. Annis*, 2020 WL 1812421, at *2 (D. Minn. Apr. 9, 2020). Not only is exhaustion of administrative remedies required under the law, but it also “makes good policy sense.” *United States v. Fevold*, 2020 WL 1703846, at *1 (E.D. Wis. Apr. 8, 2020). “The warden and those in charge of inmate health and safety are in a far better position than the sentencing court to know the risks inmates in their custody are facing and the facility’s ability to mitigate those risks and provide for the care and safety of the inmates.” *Id.* As the Third Circuit has recognized, “[g]iven BOP’s shared desire for a safe and healthy prison environment . . . strict compliance with § 3582(c)(1)(A)’s exhaustion requirement takes on added—and critical—importance.” *Raia*, 954 F.3d at 597.

For these reasons, the Court will deny Defendant’s Motion without prejudice to a renewed motion once he has appropriately exhausted his administrative remedies.

III. CARES ACT

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the President signed the CARES Act into law on March 27, 2020. Pub. L. 116-136, 134 Stat 281, 516. Section 12003(b)(2) of the Act gives the Director of the BOP authority to lengthen the maximum amount of time a prisoner may be placed

in home confinement under 18 U.S.C. § 3624(c)(2) during the covered emergency period, if the Attorney General finds that emergency conditions will materially affect the functioning of the BOP. On April 3, 2020, the Attorney General issued a memorandum to the Director of the BOP making that finding and directing the immediate processing of suitable candidates for home confinement. However, nothing in the CARES Act gives the Court a role in determining those candidates. *See United States v. Caudle*, 740 F. App'x 364, 365 (4th Cir. 2018) (district court lacks authority to govern designation of prisoners under § 3624(c)(2)).

IV. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

Defendant contends that the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment supports his motion. But Eighth Amendment protections and standards are not applicable to the compassionate release analysis under Section 3582(c). *See United States v. Butler*, No. 16-54-RGA, 2020 WL 3207591, at *3 (D. Del. June 15, 2020) (stating that defendant's contention that BOP officials have mishandled the COVID-19 crisis and are violating the inmates' Eighth Amendment rights does not provide a basis for compassionate release); *United States v. Statom*, No. 08-20669, 2020 WL 261156, at *3 (E.D. Mich. May 21, 2020); *United States v. Rodriguez-Collazo*, No. 14-CR-00387, 2020 WL 2126756, at *3 (E.D. Pa. May 4, 2020) ("Defendant contends that the current conditions at Elkton FCI violate his Fifth and Eighth Amendment rights. However, these claims—which the Court construes as challenging the execution of his sentence at Elkton FCI—are not properly brought in a motion for compassionate release[.]"); *United States v. Numann*, No. 3:16-CR-00025-TMB, 2020 WL 1977117, at *4 (D. Alaska Apr. 24, 2020) (explaining that "claims relating to the manner and conditions of confinement . . . are not properly brought in a motion for compassionate release").

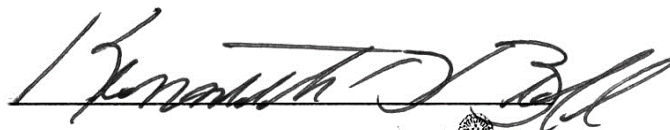
To the extent that Defendant wishes to raise a claim that prison officials' deliberate indifference to his medical needs has resulted in an independent violation of his Eighth Amendment rights, he would need to do so in a lawsuit brought pursuant to *Bivens v. Six Unknown Named Federal Agents of Federal Bureau of Narcotics*, 403 U.S. 388 (1971), not in a compassionate release motion. A civil rights action under *Bivens* will not result in Defendant's immediate release, but rather is a private action for damages against federal officials alleged to have violated a citizen's constitutional rights. Therefore, to the extent Defendant is challenging the execution of his confinement and seeks immediate release from custody due to alleged Eighth Amendment violations, he should file a petition seeking habeas corpus relief under § 2241. That petition must be filed in the district of confinement. *See generally United States v. Little*, 392 F.3d 671, 679 (4th Cir. 2004) (holding that the district court in which the defendant filed his § 2241 was not the proper venue because it was not the district of confinement).¹

V. ORDER

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that Defendant's motion for compassionate release and reduction in sentence and home confinement (Doc. No. 1028), is **DENIED** without prejudice to a renewed motion properly supported by evidence and after exhaustion of his administrative remedies.

SO ORDERED.

Signed: August 11, 2020



Kenneth D. Bell
United States District Judge



¹ Defendant is confined at FCI Butner Medium II, which is located in the Eastern District of North Carolina.